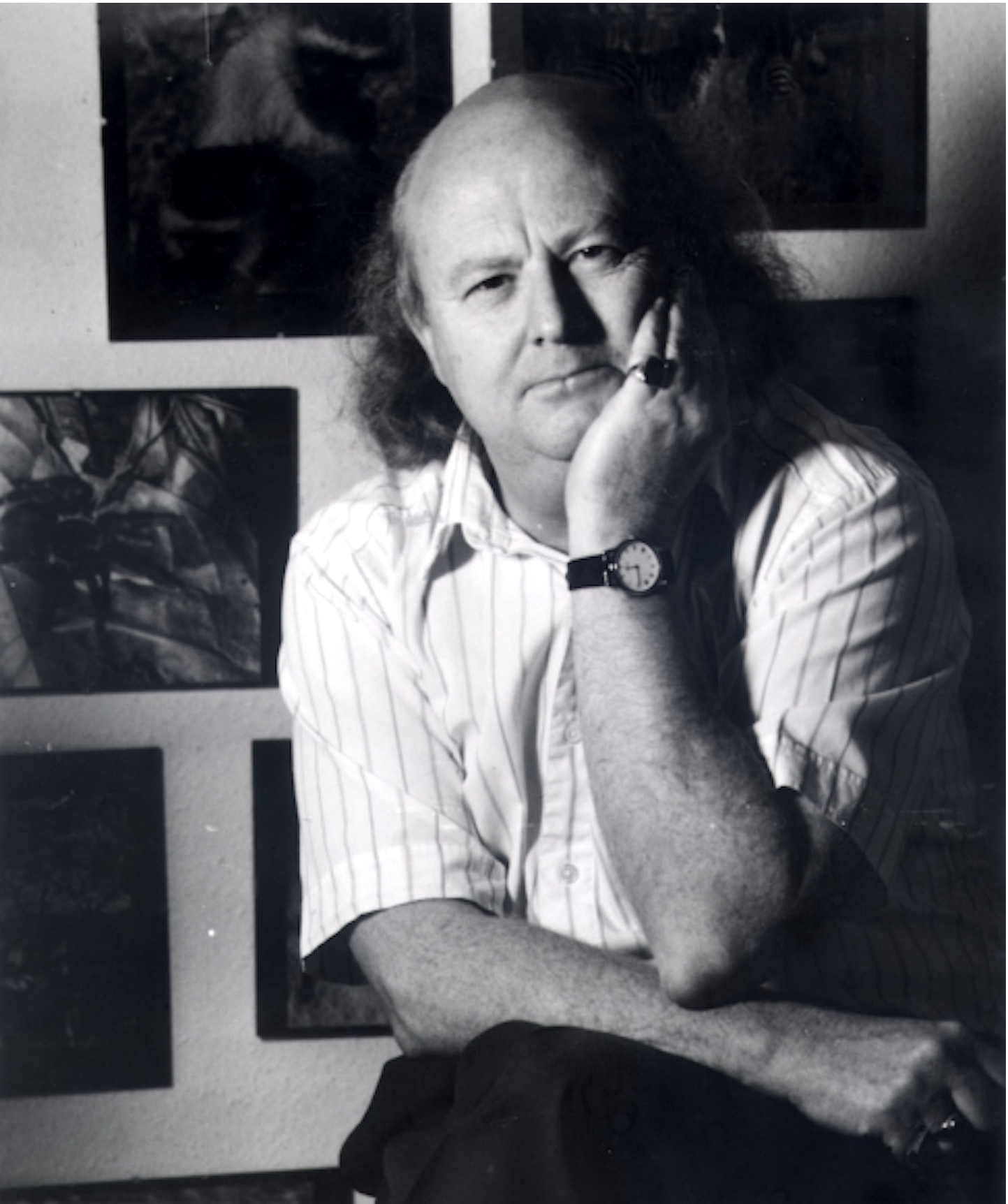

ALEISTER CROWLEY: THE WICKEDEST MAN IN BRITAIN: Martin Booth.

Producer: George MacBeth

Pre-recorded: Thursday 19th September 1974

Transmission:

Tape No: BLN38 TT 1631B

Duration:

sent at Buffalo

When Aleister Crowley died in Hastings, in December, 1947, he died in virtual obscurity, as far as the public were concerned. Ten years before, he had been heavily attacked in the British press as 'the wickedest man in Britain', had been a figure of public interest and, (one paper suggested), a bye-word for evil and moral corruption. His life from around the turn of the century had been one involved with the occult, the 'black arts' and magic: he had written, by the mid-1930's, a very large volume of magical works, proclaimed by some to be the bearers of new light and truths, by others to be the mere ramblings of an eccentric.

Crowley's initial interest in magical powers is obscure. He was the first-born son of a Quaker of not inconsiderable wealth and his father was a fanatical and early member of the Plymouth Brethren. As a child, Edward Alexander - he took the name Aleister later in life - lived with a father who preached widely and a mother who pressed her husband's beliefs heavily upon her son. It might be said that Crowley turned to the occult as an escape in early years.

Yet his earliest years were also ones of tremendous activity. After attending two public schools, he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, having first, as a youth, taken to mountaineering: his books on the subject have been authoritative until recent times and, whilst still a school-boy, he had climbed successfully in the Alps. He travelled widely and acquired a working knowledge in a number of European languages and inherited a sum around forty thousand pounds.

This knowledge of Crowley became public by the 1930's. He was hounded by the press and either revered or mocked by the public. His magical life was the property of the people: his poetic life and writings remained, by comparison, in obscurity.

Whilst up at Cambridge, Crowley published a number of pamphlets of verse. He was twenty-three at the time. And, throughout the last years of the century, he began writing more and more prolifically, and, as a result, he found his work suffering. Rather, it would be more accurate to say others found it losing power, for Crowley, like Keats, and many others before him, was so involved with his work as to be unable to tell good from bad.

His second publication, THE TALE OF ARCHAIS, was a ninety-page collection published anonymously by Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner. From it comes an early poem of beauty and strength. It shows Crowley's awareness of classic metre in its handling of Greek sapphics, a form attempted by a number of late 19th century poets in England.

IN HOLLOW STONES, SCAWFELL

Blind the iron pinnacles edge the twilight;
Blind and black the ghylls of the mountain clefted,
Crag and snow-clad slope in a distant vision
Rise as before me.

Here (it seems) my feet by a tiny torrent
Press the moss with a glad delight of being:
Here my eyes look up to the riven mountain
Split by the thunder,

Rent and rifted, shattered of wind and lightning,
Smitten, scarred, and stricken of sun and tempest,
Seamed with wounds, like adamant, shod with iron,
Torn by the earthquake.

Still through all the stresses of doubtful weather
Hold the firm old pinnacles, sky-defying;
Still the icy feet of the wind relentless
Walk in their meadows.

Fields that flower not, blossom in no new spring-tide;
Fields where grass nor herb nor abounding darnel
Flourish; fields more barren, devoid, than oceans'
Pasture ungarnered.

Deserts, stone as arid as sand, savannahs
Black with wrecks, a wilderness evil, fruitless;
Still, to me, a land of the bluest heaven
Studded with silver.

Castles bleak and bare as the wrath of ocean,
Wasted wall and tower, as the blast had risen,
Taken deep and donjon, and hurled them earthward,
Rent and uprooted.

Such rock-ruins people me tribes and nations,
Kings and queens and princes as pure as dawning,
Brave as day and true; and a happy people
Lulled into freedom;

Nations past the stormier times of tyrants,
Past the sudden spark of a great rebellion,
Past the iron gates that are thrust asunder
Not without bloodshed:

Past the rule of might and the rule of lying,
Free from gold's illusion, and free to cherish
Joy's of life diviner than war and passion -
Falsest of phantoms.

Only now true love, like a sun of molten
Glory, surging up from a sea of liquid
Silver, golden, exquisite, overflowing,
Soars into starland.

Sphere on sphere unite in the chant of wonder;
Start to star must add to the glowing chorus;
Sun and moon must mingle and speed the echo
Flaming through heaven.

Night and day divide, and the music strengthens,
Gathers roar of seas and the dirge of moorlands;
Tempest, thunder, birds and the breeze of summer
Join to augment it.

So the sound-world, filled of the fire of all things,
Rolls majestic torrents of mighty music
Through the stars where dwell the avenging spirits
Bound in the whirlwind ....

So the cliffs their Song ... For the mist regathers,
Girds them bride-like, fit for the sun to kiss them;
Darkness falls like dewfall about the hill-sides;
Night is upon me.

Now to me remain in the doubtful twilight
Stretches bare of flower, but touched with whispers,
Grey with huddled rocks, and a space of woodland,
Pine-tree and poplar.

Now a stream to ford and a stile to clamber;
Last the inn, a book, and a quiet corner ...
Fresh as Spring, there kisses me on the forehead
Sleep, like a sister.

The poem shows Crowley's ability to observe and sense the pantheistic power of nature and mountains. Here, he has an objective in mind, a desire to say something, to speak with a poet's voice and explain the phenomenon he sees and feels.

Crowley came upon the English poetry scene at a time when Swinburne was in decline and there were few poets of mystical power. He had only one corner of major competition - W.B. Yeats and "AE". Seen against these poets, it's a fair assumption, I believe, to suggest that, had Aleister Crowley not allowed his immense egoism and his magical powers to influence his art adversely, he would be remembered as a force to be reckoned with, rather than as an early imitator.

Crowley's egoism was immense: he was out-spoken, forceful and, to give him an excuse, highly confident of his poetic capabilities. In the same year as THE TALE OF ARCHAIS was published - 1898 - Crowley also brought out six other poetic publications. The best known of these is WHITE STAINS, written and published by Crowley as being 'The Literary Remains of George Archibald Bishop, A Neuropath of the Second Empire.'

WHITE STAINS is a very mixed book, containing some fine poetry and some atrocious rubbish. C.R. Cammell, in his book ALEISTER CROWLEY: THE MAN: THE MAGE: THE POET, says of Crowley's poetry that his finest work is that with foundation in higher and lovelier matters: that his worse poetry comes from 'rotten ideas' and, beyond doubt, Cammell is correct. He quotes the lines:-

The World for a Whore!
The Sky for a Harlot!
All life - at your door -
For a woman of scarlet!

I'll give it and more
In this planet of boredom
For a girl that's a whore,
And is proud of her whoredom!

This an example of Crowley going out to shock. He was always a ready joker, pleased to shock and cause outrage and there <u>is</u> a large volume of his work that falls into the category of Cammell's 'rotten ideas'

There is also a glut of poetry that falls between the two stools. SONNET FOR A PICTURE is just such a poem. Written in Ceylon, near an important Buddhist religious shrine, one might expect great things from Crowley, yet this is what evolves.

SONNET FOR A PICTURE

Lured by the loud big-breasted courtesan
That plies trained lechery of obedient eyes,
He sits, hold's bed's last slattern-sweet surprise,
Late plucked from gutter to grace groves of Pan.
The third one, ruddy as they twain are wan,
Hungrily gazes, sees her tower of lies,
Blasted that instant in some wizard wise -
The frozen look - the miserable man!

What sudden barb of what detested dart
Springs from Apollo's bowstring to his heart?
On sense-dulled ears what Voice rings the decree?
"For thee the women burn: the wine is cool:
For thee the fresco and the fruit - thou fool!
This night thy soul shall be required of thee!"

The sonnet is a mediocre piece, mixed and muddled in its aims and technically weak. It shows Crowley's love of rhetorical language, the classical myths and anything which, in those days, smacked of mysticism to him. But the last line, in particular, has a certain black energy and power.

Crowley's poetry until 1898 fitted into two main streams: either it was original and powerfully new or it was imitative of Swinburne and, in WHITE STAINS, of Baudelaire's SPLEEN. However, during that year, Crowley met abroad a chemist called Baker and, through a conversation on alchemy, was later introduced to George Cecil Jones, another chemist in London and a member of the magical order of The Golden Dawn. Crowley was soon to meet Samuel Liddell Mathers, the leader of the society and its members, featuring with others William Butler Yeats. The documentation of Crowley's activities within The Golden Dawn is lengthy and complex. It's sufficient here to say that Crowley entered very fully into the activities of the society, rising by means of promotion through ritual and magical initiation at an unprecedented speed. Ultimately, through his driving ambition to reach the hierarchy of the order, he and Yeats quarrelled violently, ostensibly about the feeling Crowley had that Yeats had wronged Mathers. Crowley tried many means to overcome Yeats, including casting spells on him and bringing a law suit against him: but all was in vain. Finally, the society split, with Mathers as leader of one faction and Crowley as his right-hand man and heir.

As far as his poetry was concerned, Crowley's entry into an occult society was an important formative influence. His love of rhetoric and his already proven control of rhythm and metre lent themselves ideally to the construction of oaths, prayers and hymns. Here is THE ALCHEMIST'S HYMN.

E ALCHEMISTS HYMN)

Sulphur, Salt and Mercury:
Which is master of the three?

Salt is Lady of the Sea:
Lord of Air is Mercury.

Now by God's grace here is salt
Fixed beneath the violet vault.

Now by God's love purge it through
With our right Hermetic dew.

Now by God wherein we trust
Be our sophic salt combust.

Then at last the Eye shall see
Three in One and One in Three,

Sulphur, Salt and Mercury,
Crowned by Heavenly Alchemy!

To the One who sent the Seven
Glory in the Highest Heaven!

To the Seven who are the Ten
Glory on the Earth!

Amen!

This poem was never to be published, having been intended for a book of verse, THE GIANT'S THUMB, destroyed in proof stage. It may seem a slight poem to the ordinary reader, using magical numbers and assuming the stance of a chant: to a lesser degree than many of the occult poems, it is really esoteric and ultimately of especial significance to the adept only. But it does come more into its own at a period when a poet as important as Ted Hughes has used the images and rhythmns of liturgy to describe a new mythology of his own.

During the first half-decade of the century, Crowley was also writing in other veins. His poetry now, however, looked at the wonderment of life increasingly through the occult, and he began to abandon his Wordsworthian nature poems. Two poems illustrate best this occult leaning in his work. THE ROSICRUCIAN and THE ROSE AND THE CROSS. Rosicrucianism, on which The Golden Dawn was loosely based and appended, was a religious occult society with its bases in the Middle Ages. It arose in secret amongst those who sought an alternative to Christianity - which suited Crowley admirably - and claimed as its forerunners the Templars. In the 1890's it was 'in vogue' with a number of the intelligensia, and numbered amongst its members some leading literary figures of the day: The Golden Dawn had the Astronomer Royal for Scotland as an initiate, with Allan Bennett, Arthur Machin and A.E. Waite, Algernon Blackwood being on the edge of membership. Its existence arose, perhaps, not as an alternative to the strict Victorian attitudes of the church, not to mention as an alternative to the outwardly pious but inwardly hypocritical attitudes widely voiced. Here is THE ROSICRUCIAN.

I see the centuries wax and wane.
I know their mystery of pain,
  The secrets of the living fire,
The key of life: I live: I reign:
  For I am master of desire.

Silent, I pass amid the folk
Caught in its mesh, slaves to its yoke.
  Silent, unknown, I work and will
Redemption, godhead's master-stroke,
  And breaking of the wands of ill.

No man hath seen beneath my brows
Eternity's exultant house.
  No man hath noted in my brain
The knowldege of my mystic spouse.
  I watch the centuries wax and wane.

Poor, in the kingdom of strong gold,
My power is swift and uncontrolled.
  Simple, amid the maze of lies;
A child, among the cruel old,
  I plot their stealthy destinies.

So patient, in a breathless strife;
So silent, under scrouge and knife;
  So tranquil, in the surge of things;
I bring them from the well of Life,
  Love, from celestial water-springs.

From the shrill fountain-head of God
I draw out water with the rod
  Made luminous with light of power.
I seal each aeon's period,
  And wait the moment and the hour.

Aloof, alone, unloved, I stand
With love and worship in my hand.
  I commune with the Gods: I wait
Their summons, and I fire the brand.
  I speak their word: and there is Fate.

I know no happiness, no pain,
No swift emotion, no disdain,
  No pity: but the boundless light
Of the Eternal Love, unslain,
  Flows through me to redeem the night.

Mine is a sad slow life: but I,
I would not gain release, and die
  A moment ere my task be done.
To falter now were treachery -
  I should not dare to greet the sun!

Yet, in one hour I dare not hope,
The mighty gate of Life may ope,
  And call me upward to unite
(Even my soul within the scope)
  With That Unutterable Light.

Steady of purpose, girt with Truth,
I pass, in my eternal youth,
And watch the centuries wax and wane:
Untouched by Time's corroding tooth,
Silent, immortal, unprofane!

My empire changes not with time.
Men's kingdom's cadent as a rime
Move me as waves that rise and fall.
They are the parts, that crash or climb;
I only comprehend the all.

I sit, as God must sit; I reign.
Redemption from the threads of pain
I weave, until the veil be drawn.
I burn the chaff, I glean the grain;
In silence I await the dawn.

The Rose and the Cross was, in a way, the literary establishment's recognition of Crowley as a poet of, if not a great qualitative volume of verse, at least a man possible of it, for the poem was one of three to appear in the first "Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse" published in 1917. It's perhaps an easier piece than THE ROSICRUCIAN, though it explores the same themes.

THE ROSE AND THE CROSS

(THE ROSE AND THE CROSS)

Out of the seething cauldron of my woes,
  Where sweets and salt and bitterness I flung;
Where charmed music gathered from my tongue,
And where I chained strange archipelagoes
Of fallen stars; where fiery passion flows
  A curious bitumen; where among
  The glowing medley moved the tune unsung
Or perfect Love: thence grew the Mystic Rose.

Its myriad petals of divided light;
  Its leaves of the most radiant emerald;
Its heart of fire like rubies. At the sight
  I lifted up my heart to God and called:
How shall I pluck this dream of my desire?
And lo! there shaped itself the Cross of Fire!

As he became more and more involved with the occult, Crowley became less competent as a poet of other than chants and incantations. His last real achievement in verse came with the publication in 1907 of RODIN IN RIME, a set of poems based for their initial ideas upon some water-colours by Auguste Rodin, who wrote to Crowley with praise for the poems. For the last time Crowley had the ideas of higher things and the poems, though in places uneven again, showed much delicacy and poetic insight. Here is ACROBATES, a graceful little poem which perhaps echoes the rhythm of Arthur Symons in some of his poems about dancers. I reminds us how central in some ways Crowley was to the traditions of the 90's.

ACROBATES

My little lady light o'limb
  Twirls on her lover's twisting toes,
  Lithe as a lynx, red as a rose,
She spins aloft and laughs at him.
So gay the pose, so quaint the whim,
  One stars and stares: it grows and grows,

So swift the air she seems to skim
  One's sense dazzle; wonder glows
  Warm in one's veins like love - who knows?
One follows till one's eyes are dim
My little lady light o'limb

For most of Crowley's life he was addicted to drugs and this, linked with his devouring interest in occult arts which, began with such seriousness, but degenerated into near mumbo-jumbo, adversely affected his talent as a poet and a writer. He increasingly failed to keep his eyes on the target, and his writing became more vague and more hectic. MOONCHILD, the high point, but none do justice to the genius Aleister Crowley had in him, but never fully allowed to give voice. In his poor verse he had tried to shock, disgust and scandalise; in his good poetry, he succeeded in raising the spirit to a higher plane, and in a handful of pieces he achieves work of lasting interest.

In RODIN IN RIME, Crowley included the poem, BALZAC, describing Rodin's famous sculpture of the great French writer. It's an appropriate point to end: the poem is one lacking conceit and self-indulgence, jokery and mockery. And it's perhaps the last good poem Crowley wrote:

BALZAC

BALZAC

Giant with iron secrecies ennighted,
Cloaked, Balzac stands and sees. Immense disdain,
Egyptian silence, mastery of pain,
Gargantuan laughter, shake or still the ignited
Stature of the Master; vivid. Far, affrighted,
The stunned air shudders on the skin. In vain
The Master of 'La Comédie Humaine'
Shadows the deep-set eyes, genius lighted.

Epithalamia, birth-songs, epitaphs,
Are written in the mystery of his lips.
Sad wisdom, scornful shame, grand agony
In the coffin-folds of the cloak, scarred mountains, lie
And pity hides i' th' heart. Grim knowledge grips
The essential manhood. Balzac stands, and laughs.

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Amen.

This poem was never to be published, having been intended for a book of verse, THE GIANT'S THUMB, destroyed [illegible] stage. It may seem a slight poem to the ordinary reader, using magical numbers and assuming the stance of a chant: to a lesser degree than many of the occult poems, it is really esoteric and ultimately of especial significance to the adept only. But it does come more into its own at a period when a poet as important as Ted Hughes has used the images and rhythmns of liturgy to describe a new mythology of his own.

During the first half-decade of the century Crowley was also writing in other veins. His poetry now, however, [illegible] at the wonderment of life increasingly through the occult. [illegible] he began to abandon his Wordsworthian nature-poems. Two poems illustrate best this occult leaning in his work: THE ROSICRUCIAN and THE ROSE AND THE CROSS. Rosicrucianism, on which the Golden Dawn was loosely based and appended, was a religious-occult society with its bases in the Middle Ages. It arose in secret amongst those who sought an alternative to Christianity - which Aleister Crowley, admirably - and claimed as its forerunners the Templars. In the 1890's it was 'in vogue' with a number of the intelligensia, and numbered amongst its members some leading literary figures of the day: The Golden Dawn had the Astronomer Royal, Sir [illegible] as an initiate, with Allan Bennett, Arthur Machen, [illegible], Algernon Blackwood being on the edge of membership. Its [illegible] arose, perhaps, not as an alternative to the [illegible] attitudes of the church, not to mention as an alternative to the outwardly pious but inwardly hypocritical attitudes widely voiced. Here is THE ROSICRUCIAN:

I see the centuries wax and wane.
I know their mystery of pain,
  The secrets of the living fire,
The key of life: I live: I reign:
  For I am master of desire.

Silent, I pass amid the folk
Caught in its mesh, slaves to its yoke.
  Silent, unknown, I work and will
Redemption, godhead's master-stroke;
  And breaking of the wands of ill.

No man hath seen beneath my brows
Eternity's exultant house.
  No man hath noted in my brain
The knowldege of my mystic spouse.
  I watch the centuries wax and wane.

Poor, in the kingdom of strong gold,
My power is swift and uncontrolled.
  Simple, amid the maze of lies;
A child, among the cruel old,
  I plot their stealthy destinies.

So patient, in a breathless strife;
So silent, under scrouge and knife;
  So tranquil, in the surge of things
I bring them from the well of Life,
  Love, from celestial water-springs.

From the shrill fountain-head of God
I draw out water with the rod
  Made luminous with light of power,
I seal each aeon's period,
  And wait the moment and the hour.

Aloof, alone, unloved, I stand
With love and worship in my hand;
  I commune with the gods: I wait
Their summons, and I fire the brand
  I speak their word: and there is Fate.

I know no happiness, no pain,
No swift emotion, no disdain,
  No pity: but the boundless light
Of the Eternal Love, unslain,
  Flows through me to redeem the night.

Mine is a sad slow life: but I,
I would not gain release, and die
  A moment ere my task be done.
To falter now were treachery -
  I should not dare to greet the sun!

Yet, in one hour I dare not hope,
The mighty gate of Life may ope,
  And call me upward to unite
(Even my soul within the scope)
  With That Unutterable Light.

Steady of purpose, girt with Truth,
pass, in my eternal youth,
And watch the centuries wax and wane:
Untouched by Time's corroding tooth,
Clean, immortal, unprofane!

My empire changes not with time.
Man's kingdom's cadent as a rime
Move me as waves that rise and fall.
They are the parts, that crash or climb;
I only comprehend the all.

I sit, as God must sit, I reign.
Redemption from the threads of pain
I weave, until the veil be drawn.
I burn the chaff, I glean the grain;
In silence I await the dawn.

The Rose and the Cross was, in a way, the literary establishment's recognition of Crowley as a poet of, if not a great [illegible] volume of verse, at least a man possible of it, for the [illegible] to appear in the first "Oxford Book of [illegible] Verse" published in 1917. It's perhaps an easier [illegible] THE ROSICRUCIAN, though it explores the same themes.

THE ROSE AND THE CROSS.

(THE ROSE AND THE CROSS)

Out of the seething cauldron of my woes,
  Where sweets and salt and bitterness I flung,
Where charmèd music gathered from my tongue,
And where I chained strange archipelagoes
Of fallen stars; where fiery passion flows
  A curious bitumen; where among
  The glowing medley moved the tune unsung
Or perfect Love: thence grew the Mystic Rose.

Its myriad petals of divided Light,
  Its leaves of the most radiant emerald,
Its heart of fire like rubies. At the sight
  I lifted up my heart to God and called,
How shall I pluck this dream of my desire?
And lo! there shaped itself the Cross of fire!

As he became more and more involved with the occult, Crowley became less competent as a poet of other than chants and incantations. His last real achievement in verse came with the publication in 1907 of RODIN IN RIME, a set of poems based rdy their initial ideas upon some water-colours by Auguste Rodin, who wrote to Crowley with praise for the poems. For the last time Crowley had the ideas of higher things and the poems, though in places uneven again, showed much delicacy and poetic insight. Here is ACROBATES, a graceful little poem which [illegible] the rhythm of Arthur Symons in some of his poems about dancers. It reminds us how central in some ways Crowley was to the traditions of the 90's.

ACROBATES

My little lady light o'limb
  Twirls on her lover's twisting toes,
  Lithe as a lynx, red as a rose,
She spins aloft and laughs at him.
So gay the pose, so quaint the whim,
  One stars and stares: it grows and grows,

So swift the air she seems to skim,
  One's sense dazzle, wonder glows,
  Warm in one's veins like love — who knows?
One follows till one's eyes are dim
My little lady light o'limb.

For most of Crowley's life he was addicted to drugs and this, linked with his devouring interest in magic forms which began with such seriousness, but degenerated into mumbo-jumbo, adversely affected his talent as a poet and a writer. He increasingly failed to keep his eyes on the target and his writing became more vague and more hectic. MOONCHILD, the high point, but none do justice to the genius Aleister Crowley had in him, but never fully allowed to give [illegible] his poor verse he had tried to shock, disgust and scandalize, in his good poetry, he succeeded in raising the spirit to a higher plane, and in a handful of pieces he achieves work of [illegible] literature.

In RODIN IN RIME, Crowley included [illegible], describing Rodin's famous sculpture of the great French writer. It is an appropriate point to end the poem, one free from conceit and self-indulgence, jokery and mockery. And it is perhaps the last good poem Crowley wrote:

BALZAC

BALZAC

Giant with iron secrecies ennighted,
Cloaked, Balzac stands and sees. Immense, hidden
Egyptian silence, mastery of pain,
Gargantuan laughter, shake of still the lighted
Stature of the Master, vivid, fat, straightened,
The stunned air smudges with its skins of rain.
The Master of 'La Comédie Humaine'
Shadows the deep-set eyes, genius lightens
Epithalamia, birth-songs, epitaphs,
Are written in the mystery of his lips.
Sad wisdom, scornful shame, grandeur
In the coffin-lordship of the clos
And pity hides i[illegible] heart. Grim knowledge
The essential manhood. Balzac stands,